DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 351 691 CS 213 588

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TITLE The Role of Native American Traditions in the College Composition Classroom.
PUB DATE 21 Mar 92
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (43rd, Cincinnati, OH, March 19-21, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *American Indian Culture; *American Indian Literature; American Indians; Cultural Context; *Figurative Language; Higher Education; *Literary Genres; Literary Styles; Reading Materials; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Native Americans; Oral Tradition; Writing Contexts

ABSTRACT

By including more of the works written by Native Americans, college composition students benefit from a wealth of literary works, and perhaps they will be able to move beyond preconceptions about the difficulties of comprehending traditional Native American texts. Two speeches (Leslie Marmon Silko's speech "Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective" and N. Scott Momaday's speech "Man Made of Words") show how the wealth of imagery, vividness of prose, innovative presentation of meaning, and ideas about language translate into the composition classroom. Silko uses metaphor to draw attention to the linear and non-linear rhetoric of Native American literature. She also explores the idea that stories do not really end but rather that a story is a beginning of other stories. Momaday discusses in detail the essential qualities of landscape and how it ties together the individual and culture. Native American literature offers a wealth of possibilities for the composition teacher. Native American texts can teach students a sense of community and encourage reader participation because part of understanding the story lies with the listener. In addition, students can also benefit from realizing the strong reverence for language in Native American texts. Storytelling can be incorporated into class work to show that everyone is a storyteller and has stories to tell. (RS)

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ED351691

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CCCC, Cincinnati

March 21, 1992

The Role of Native American Traditions in the College Composition Classroom

This paper hopes to help teachers become more aware of the presence of alternative discourse patterns such as Native American writing. By incorporating a wider and more diverse reading scholarship into the classroom, and including more of the works written by Native American writers, the students will be able to benefit from the wealth of literary works, and perhaps they will be able to move beyond the preconceptions we have about the difficulties of comprehending traditional Native American texts.

The focus of this paper is Native American tradition. In particular, I'd like to discuss two speeches: Leslie Marmon Silko's speech given at the 1981 Modern Language Association, entitled "Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective," and N. Scott Momaday's speech "Man Made of Words," in order to show how the wealth of imagery, vividness of prose, innovative presentation of meaning, and ideas about language translate into the composition classroom.

Native American oral tradition is based on language,

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literature, and trust. Central features of this tradition involve: memory, imagination, the movement of narrative into prose, the movement from analytic to narration, the mythic to contemporary, and the history of time and creation. In these stories/speeches, culture and communication come together, and imagination, land, and memory work together to create stories.

In the oral tradition of Native Americans one can see how culture and communication are linked. The organizational patterns, coherence and narratives of Native American texts reflect their cultures and tradition. The rhetoric of Native American literature is both linear and non-linear. In this sense then, Native American oral tradition differs from the Western tradition. Leslie Marmon Silko uses a metaphor to draw attention to this. She says at the beginning of her speech that "the structure of Pueblo expression resembles something like a spider's web" (54). Silko's speech itself does not have a linear structure. It resembles and echoes her own metaphor of a spider's web -- where "with many little threads radiating from a center . . . the structure will merge as it is made and you simply listen and trust, as Pueblo people do, that meaning will be made" (54). Here Silko is identifying the major characteristics of the oral tradition. The oral tradition can be likened to a performance where all things come into play: expression, voice, physical presence of the storyteller, time of year, setting, season, context, and others. The oral tradition also demands that the listener listens and trust the speaker as

he/she weaves the threads into a web conveying meaning. In fact, Silko emphatically stresses that "these views of structure and the dynamics of storytelling are some of the contributions which Native American cultures bring to the English language or at least to literature in the English language" (56). Both Silko and Momaday agree that as Native American writers they find and express in their speeches a deeper meaning of language and communication, and are both able to create and recreate the past with a layering effect; moving effortlessly from the present to the future, to the mythic and to the contemporary.

In her speech, "Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective," Silko explains what is meant by the term linear and non-linear structures. According to Silko, the linear and the non-linear work together. Linearity provides order and form, whereas the non-linearity accounts for the intrusions: the movement back in time, the notion of time difference and the breaks in time, and the evocation of the ancestors. Hence, Pueblo perspective is "concerned with including the whole of creation and the whole of history and time" (54). In other words, the writer needs to weave a spider's web, whose whole structure reveals meaning. According to Silko, the Native American writer begins her story by going back to the Pueblo Creation story and Tseitsinako, Thought Woman. The "all-inclusive" origin story holds and functions as the "maker of identity." In other words, evoking the ancestors is a reminder to the listeners of who they are and where they belong -- a

reminder that the people are a narrative, a story. This translates into a multiplicity of selves, because we travel back and forth in constant movement from the mythic past to the present.

Another element of Native American writing that Silko explores is the idea that stories do not really end but rather, a story is a beginning of other stories (56). She also explains that as you listen to a story, there are many other stories within a story. As she states, "there is always, always this dynamic of bringing things together, of interrelating things. It is an imperative in Pueblo oral literature, it seems to me, and it occurs structurally in narrative and in fiction" (64). This element of interrelatedness, of cohesion of many elements going on at the same time and playing a role in creating and contributing meaning, is very prominent in the oral tradition. It is also very much a part of the lifestyle of the Native American people that is inevitably woven into stories.

Audience and listeners in Native American works have a kind of "shared experience" because they rely on each other's background knowledge of culture and world view to provide the necessary insight in order to obtain meaning. Listeners take responsibility. They listen and create meaning; they take part in creating their own stories with a multiplicity of voices and intrusions. In fact, Silko believes that a part of a story is already within the listener and it is the storyteller's role to "draw the story out of the listeners" (57).

Storytelling has yet another function. It is "the heart of the Pueblo people" (60), and it is a "way of life" (59). Stories are used for different instances. For example, when a tragic event occurs, a funny story is meant to console. Often the stories will move toward a balance of the funny and the serious.

Momaday, like Silko, creates a non-linear structure for his presentation. He introduces the focus of his concern in the following manner: "I want to say something about such things as ecology and storytelling and the imagination" (162), and then he states, "Let me tell you a story" (162). The story he tells is about his own experience while finishing The Way To Rainy Mountain where he envisions the evoked female spirit of his ancestor Ko-sahn. Thus, right away he pulls the reader into the text and provides vivid examples of "imagination," because he imagines himself with the ancestoral spirit, of "storytelling," because there is a constant movement into stories, and of "ecology," because he discusses the importance of landscape and the "deep, ethical regard for the land" (167) that the image of Ko-sahn evokes. Momaday's view is that The Way to Rainy Mountain, "is a whole journey, intricate with notion and meaning; and it is made with the whole memory, that experience of the mind which is legendary as well as historical, personal as well as cultural" (170).

Hence, in both Silko's and Momaday's texts, the history of Native American people is closely linked, and inseparable from the land. Deep reverence for the land is a recurrent theme in

Native American literature. La Vonne Brown Ruoff explains this tie with the land; . . . "because the earth nurtured them and because their tribal origins and histories are associated with specific places, Native North Americans have a strong sense of the sacredness of these places" (8). Thus, harmony and balance manifests itself in Native American writing because of the narrator's closeness to the land, and his/her skillful use of language to say the words and tell the stories.

Momaday in his essay "Man Made of Words" discusses in detail the essential qualities of landscape and how it ties together the individual and culture. Momaday evokes the image of Ko-sahn, an ancestor that is a representative of his consciousness, and this creation takes on a living presence. He explains: "I had projected myself -- imagined myself -- out of the room and out of time. I was there with Ko-sahn in the Oklahoma July . . . That ancient, one-eyed woman Ko-sahn stepped out of the language and stood before me on the page" (163-64). Imagination is at the core of Momaday's ability to reconstruct the past. His evocation of Ko-sahn is an example of the strong power inside the writer's mind which permeates a literary work, and in so doing, the meaning that is created will take a tangible form and will be continuously rendering meaning for other generations (Allen 578). Momaday believes that "none of us lives apart from the land entirely; such an isolation is unimaginable" (166), and Paula Gunn Allen agrees with him when she says: "the primary impulse of the imagination is wholeness . . . It closes

the circuit . . . between I and other, creating a coherent relationship, a meaningful vision of what is" (566).

Also prominent in Native American tradition and literature is the notion and belief of circularity and cycles. Everything in life is cyclical, linear and non-linear: the land, the seasons, images, time; reliving in memory; imagination. And it is in this circular motion that we find harmony and balance. This prominent trait of circularity is evident in both Silko's and Momadays's essays. They both weave their writing in and out of stories to make a point and illustrate their message, and in so doing they reflect the cultural patterns of Native American tradition where numerous elements and factors play a role in creating a balance and a structure with a variety of meanings. As Paula Gunn Allen observes, "the way of the imagination is the way of continuity, circularity, and completeness," whereas, the way of the intellect is the way of segmentation, discontinuity, and linearity" (563).

To illustrate the emphasis on words, language, and story in the Native American oral tradition, I would like to refer to the story of "The Arrowmaker" as told by Momaday in his book The Way to Rainy Mountain. The story of the arrowmaker is for Momaday "a link between language and literature" . . . "a remarkable act of the mind, a realization of words and the world . . . and it illustrates . . . something of the essential character of the imagination . . . man made of words" (171).

The story is about language and words and meaning conveyed

through words. It centers on a "procession of words toward meaning" and within this context Momaday brings in the notion of risk and responsibility present in language (172). For example, the arrowmaker asks of the intruder only a name, an identification which, of course, requires an understanding of the words and language. He says matter-of-factly with utmost care "Let us talk easily, as of ordinary things" (172). Since the intruder does not answer, the arrowmaker knows at once that his, i.e. the arrowmaker's, life is in jeopardy. The story illustrates vividly how language, and culture, are interdependent. This is another example of Silko's metaphor of the storyteller weaving a spider's web, and we must wait and trust that meaning will be made. As Paula Gunn Allen notes, it is the justification of particular symbols in a specific sequence that makes the inner meaning apparent and leads to an understanding between audience and story (565-66).

As we have seen, the Native American oral tradition is strongly based on language, literature, and trust. Stories speak not only about the land, the ancestors, but also provide what Keith H. Basso calls "metacommunicative message" (108). Basso explains this term through Nick Thompson's statement that the stories: ". . . go to work on your mind and make you think about life. . . So someone stalks you and tells a story about what happened long ago . . . All of a sudden it hits you! It's like an arrow, they say. Sometimes it bounces off -- it's too soft and you don't think about anything. But when it's strong it goes

in deep and starts working on your mind right away" (111).

Finally, we need to examine what contributions can all this have in college composition classroom. Native American literature offers a wealth of possibilities for the composition teacher. For instance, one can examine Silko's work in terms of the Rhetorical Analysis assignment. The focus here would be on the rhetorical devices writers use to create an effective story. Another way of using Native American texts in the composition classroom is to examine a text from what Ruppert calls the psychological and sociological perspective. By bringing into the classroom Native American literary works, students find that the Native American approach to texts moves beyond just the psychological and sociological perspective to include the mythical and the communal aspect as well. Thus, the understanding of the text reflects a much broader perspective. James Ruppert points out that "the text will effectively need to teach any reader how to read the work, and, thus, how to perceive new evoked realities and new modes of knowledge" (223). As an example, Ruppert examines Momaday's House Made of Dawn from four different perspectives: mythological, communal, psychological, and sociological. Consequently, non-native American students can be taught and encouraged by the text to develop their own mythic imagination. Similarly, native American students can also be encouraged to be aware of the linear dimension in the texts of the Western tradition (Ruppert 223).

Native American texts can teach students a sense of

community and encourage reader participation because part of understanding the story lies with the listener. Silko calls this a "spider web" -- where you listen and trust so that meaning will be made. Native American texts offer the student an awareness of "performance": a balanced intermingling of many elements such as mixture of expression, voice, physical presence of storyteller, time of year, setting, and an awareness of the layering effect of language to account for the writer's movement from the contemporary mode to the mythic.

In addition, the students in composition classes can also benefit from realizing the strong reverence for language in Native American texts because the "spider web" effect and the "layering" effect create "all inclusive" stories that capture the past and the present.

Despite the vast potential of using Native American texts in the composition classroom, it must be remembered that each student, Native American or not, also has his/her own stories to tell. Hence, storytelling can be incorporated into class work to show that everyone is a storyteller and has stories to tell. For instance, the whole class could participate in telling stories and adding details so students will be able to get a sense of their own community. In his proposal to integrate American Indian autobiography in a composition course, David Sudol outlines assignments that are based on reading autobiographies by Native Americans and then writing students' own autobiographies. He provides several strong reasons for teaching American Indian

autobiography. Besides his own interests in the genre and his desires to expand the canon, Sudol believes such a course would appeal to a wide audience: it will attract students interested in Native American peoples; "it may also attract female students by including works of American Indian women"; "minority students, especially Native Americans, who have few classes that acknowledge their ethnic experience"; and finally, such a course would "appeal to young adults, so many of whom are struggling to find themselves" (28).

Silko sums up the importance and relevance of using Native American writing in the composition classroom when she says that it can create in us an understanding and "appreciation for the boundless capacity of language which, through storytelling, brings us together, despite great distances between cultures, despite great distances in time" (72).

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